

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL JOINT PUBLIC STATEMENT

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JOINT STATEMENT: SAUDI ARABIA MUST FREE DETAINEES JAILED FOR THEIR ONLINE EXPRESSION AHEAD OF INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUM

Saudi Arabia must free all individuals arbitrarily detained solely for their online expression ahead of hosting the United Nations Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Riyadh, which will take place from 15 to 19 December 2024. It is counter to the IGF's stated values for Saudi Arabia to host the IGF. In 2024 it adopted a thematic focus on advancing human rights and inclusion in the digital age and Saudi Arabia continues to prosecute, lock up, forcibly disappear and intimidate people into silence for expressing themselves on social media.

In fewer than 100 days, Saudi authorities are set to lead critical conversations on shaping the future of Internet governance, all while they subject people in their country to unprecedented repression and decades-long prison sentences merely for expressing critical views online.

One of the most emblematic cases of this repression is that of Osama Khalid, a Saudi Arabian medical doctor and Wikipedia administrator who worked to make well-sourced knowledge freely available on Wikipedia. According to information available to our organizations, Khalid is currently serving a 32-year prison sentence on trumped up charges of "swaying public opinion" and "violating public morals". He was arrested in the summer of 2020 alongside another Wikipedia administrator in Saudi Arabia, Ziad al-Sufyani.

Similarly, on 9 January 2024, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), Saudi Arabia's notorious terrorism court, sentenced Manahel al-Otaibi, a 30-year-old fitness instructor and women's rights activist, to 11 years in prison for her promotion of women's rights online. Her conviction followed a secret trial marred by due process violations. The SCC found her guilty of "terrorist offences" due to her tweets in support of women's rights as well as photos she posted on Snapchat of herself at the mall without an abaya (a traditional loose-fitting long-sleeved robe). The verdict against her came just three months after Saudi Arabia was confirmed as host of the IGF.

Salma al-Shehab, a 35-year-old PhD student and mother of two small children, has been in prison since 2021 serving an absurdly long prison sentence for her social media posts supporting women's rights. On 25 January 2023, the SCC appeals chamber reduced her sentence from 34 years to 27 years in prison, followed by a 27-year travel ban on terrorism-related offences after a grossly unfair trial.

Abdulrahman al-Sadhan, a 41-year-old Red Crescent worker, was detained in March 2018 and is currently subject to enforced disappearance. In April 2020, the SCC sentenced him to 20 years in prison followed by a 20-year travel ban solely for his satirical tweets following a trial marred by violations, including a "confession" extracted under duress.

In July 2023, the SCC sentenced Mohammad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi, a 55-year-old retired schoolteacher, to death for criticising the Saudi authorities on X (formerly Twitter) and his online activity on Youtube. He had a total of only 10 followers on both of his anonymous X accounts. His death sentence marked an escalation in the Saudi authorities' use of the death penalty to crackdown on freedom of expression.

These cases are emblematic of the Saudi authorities' chilling crackdown on freedom of expression, but they are not isolated examples. Dozens of people in Saudi Arabia, including visitors to the country, have been detained solely for their online expression. Consequently, many civil society organizations and advocates, who would ordinarily attend the IGF, have chosen not to travel to Saudi Arabia, fearing that they cannot safely and freely participate in the conference.

The Saudi authorities must immediately and unconditionally release Osama Khalid, Ziad al-Sufyani, Manahel al-Otaibi, Abdulrahman al-Sadhan, Salma al-Shehab, Mohammad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi, and all others unjustly imprisoned for their online expression. This is a crucial first step to demonstrate that they are serious about being drivers of Internet governance reform.

All IGF participants — states, international organizations and individuals — must also demand the freedom of those unjustly detained for their online expression or else risk their presence at the IGF being instrumentalized to whitewash the violations of a government intent on silencing all critical voices online.

Signatories:

1. Access Now
2. Amnesty International
3. ARTICLE19
4. ALQST for Human Rights
5. Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, CDHR
6. Centre for Social Change (University of Johannesburg)
7. DAWN
8. Digital Action
9. Electronic Frontier Foundation
10. Equidem
11. ESOHR
12. FairSquare
13. Femena
14. Freedom Forward
15. Freedom House
16. Fundación Karisma
17. Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)
18. Global Network Initiative
19. Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
20. Human Rights Sentinel
21. Human Rights Watch
22. Internet Freedom Foundation
23. Index on Censorship
24. International Federation for Human Rights
25. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
26. MENA Rights Group
27. Middle East Democracy Center
28. Muwatin Media Network
29. Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business
30. No Peace Without Justice
31. PEN America
32. RootsAction Education Fund
33. SMEX

34. Tech Global Institute
35. The Tor Project
36. Rinascimento Green
37. South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, Durban, South Africa
38. ReThinking Foreign Policy
39. Urgent Action Fund for Feminist Activism
40. Western New York Peace Center